

LOUISE H. FORSYTH

SELF-PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS RADICAL FEMINIST IN EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE: *JOIE* BY POL PELLETIER

*Pol Pelletier (comédienne, metteuse en scène, dramaturge, enseignante, fondatrice de théâtre, et directrice artistique) est l'une des rares femmes artistes du théâtre qui a publié et performé des oeuvres théoriques sur le jeu. Elle s'est donné l'objectif radical de changer la pratique du théâtre, et du monde même. Elle voulait que les femmes découvrent des mythologies qui résonnent avec leurs expériences et qu'elles arrivent ainsi à jouer des rôles forts et authentiques. De telles mythologies et de tels rôles restent encore rares sur les scènes d'aujourd'hui. À la base de la pratique et de la position théorique de Pelletier figure la conviction que les femmes doivent se débarrasser d'idéologies et de conventions reçues qui limitent de façon dangereuse le plein exercice de l'esprit, du corps et de la voix. Entre 1975 et 1985 Pelletier s'engageait vigoureusement au théâtre expérimental et à la création collective, jusqu'au point de fonder le premier théâtre féministe permanent du Canada, le Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes. *Joie*, créée en 1990, est la première pièce d'une trilogie dramatique où Pelletier fait rétrospectivement le point sur les réussites éblouissantes et les déceptions écrasantes de cette période expérimentale. C'est la re-création d'une tranche de sa vie. C'est en même temps une performance dramatique et un programme théorique pour le renouveau non-sexiste du théâtre.*



Ça fait dix ans que je rêve de voir sur une scène des personnages féminins "autres", l'explosion d'une mythologie féminine, forte, grande, inédite. ("Histoire d'une féministe," Trac 92)¹

CHANGER LE MONDE. Oui, j'ai cette prétention. (Joie 95)²

Pol Pelletier is a well-known and widely respected woman of theatre in Québec: actor, director, playwright, artistic director, acting theorist, and teacher. She is equally well known for her commitment to the total transformation of stage practice. Her involvement in theatre began in the 1960s. Then, early in her professional career, she co-founded two experimental theatre companies: the Théâtre Expérimental de Montréal (TEM, 1975)

and the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes (TEF, 1979). It was a time when others shared her conviction that change is essential and were willing to spend time and energy collaborating in the exploration of experimentation's potential. The TEM and the TEF were remarkable laboratories of collaborative creation in Montréal. The TEF, in which Pelletier played the leading role between 1979 and 1985, was likely the first feminist theatre company in Canada, and perhaps even the first in North America, with its own house. The atmosphere at the TEF was heady for players and spectators; it was also exhausting and often tense, as Pelletier's vision and drive stirred simultaneously intense enthusiasm and intense controversy. However, her contribution to theories of acting and the understanding of women's memory, creativity, physical presence, and spirit in theatrical performance cannot be overestimated.

After a decade Pelletier felt the need to take a break and give herself some personal space and distance. She resigned from the TEF and, having already travelled to South America, she went on an extended voyage to India. Five years later she wrote the autobiographical performance piece *Joie* (premiered 1990), in which she stepped back and reflected on her theatrical work between 1975 and 1985, what she had accomplished, and where she was in the present. The play shows that her innovative work, although passionately gratifying, was never easy. Pelletier's objective in *Joie* is to recapture memory, to celebrate high points of an exciting decade, and to examine low points carefully. *Joie* mirrors in evocative shards some of the many faces of Pol Pelletier, as herself—consummate actor and writer—and as the many characters she played during this intensely creative period. In the alternation between re-creation of roles played in the past and questions still erupting in the present, Pelletier captures in the play the many conflicting emotions she felt in her ten-year commitment to the transformation of theatrical conventions and practices: “en écrivant ce spectacle, je voulais répondre à des questions de fond sur mon métier.”³ Her choice of a play as the medium for retrospective reflection, rather than an essay, highlights the fact that for Pelletier theory has not ever been abstract. Rather, the theoretical imperative for her is thought, emotion, and imagination in action on the public stage.

We can see, then, that *Joie* is experimental, autobiographical theatre.⁴ It is also autoreferential in its reflections on doing theatre, in that its primary focus is not on particular events in Pelletier's personal life, as autobiographical traditions might lead us to

expect. Instead, it is a play about making plays.⁵ It has historical and testimonial elements, but its salient and sustained component is a theoretical exploration for other ways of doing theatre, particularly other ways of women doing theatre. Without fresh performance strategies, women's stories are likely to remain buried beneath the weight of sexist traditions and practices.

Joie was the first autobiographical retrospective in a theatrical trilogy: *La Trilogie des histoires. Océan*, the second one-woman performance, evokes the period 1985-1990 and themes of personal transformation when Pelletier's mother died and during the spiritual journey she took in India. *Or*, the third piece, is a return to the study in action of radically innovative theories of acting. For six years the three plays of the trilogy were a stage work in progress, with Pelletier performing and modifying successive versions.⁶ *La Trilogie des histoires* served as a mobile mirror that Pelletier wrote and performed to understand and share understanding of her quest as a woman of theatre for practices that offer the possibility of representing women in their integrity, from both inner and outer perspectives. The plays offer audiences the extraordinary opportunity of sharing the dazzling beauty of Pelletier's dream for theatre. At the same time, they show the harsh truth that the dream remains far from realized. The vision of what theatre could be is evoked in memories of earlier moments, while the voices of Pelletier's *personae* reveal profound disappointments. Joy is affirmed; love for spectators is expressed; yet there is grief that she failed to overcome lack of understanding in fellow players and publics.

Since the scripts of *Océan* and *Or* have never been published or deposited with the Centre des Auteurs Dramatiques, and so are unavailable for consultation, I have limited my study in this paper to the representation of ten years in Pelletier's theatrical career, as dramatized in *Joie*.

Theories of Acting / Ten years of Experimentation 1975-1985

Pelletier was convinced from the beginning of her career that theatrical conventions, as taught in theatre courses and applied through directors on most stages, deprived players of their vital energy by stressing textual interpretation over imaginative discovery and by relying upon sexist stereotypes that predetermine the ways in which roles are to be played and actions between characters are to be represented. In her view actors are sources of physical force and spiritual vision with the potential, if only they are able to release them, of bringing about transformations in themselves and

in spectators. Untrammelled experimentation can help to decondition actors and free them from the straitjackets that internalized stereotypes and ready-to-play theatrical conventions have constructed in their bodies and their minds. It can quell the fear, guilt, and doubt that individuals often feel when they are moving off the path beaten by voices of authorities and into the unknown. Pelletier's perspective on experimental theatre has always involved the whole person—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In order to get into the regions where transformation can occur, preconceived notions about movement, sounds, voice, and space must be set aside; scripts inscribed in memory must be forgotten and primitive work with the body must be the starting point: “La voix qui est branchée à mon coccyx qui est branché à mes pieds, qui sont branchés à ma tête. SAUTE! SAUTE! Déplacer de l'air, fouler la terre, avoir des os et des muscles et quasi en mourir de ravissement” (*Joie* 97).⁷

In Pelletier's approach actors, previously conditioned to believe that costumes, make-up, blocking, and dialogue constitute their roles, begin through a return to pre-linguistic corporeal presence, so they may hear the impulses and messages from within, while moving their bodies to the rhythms of their own visceral sounds. Her work involved stripping away non-essential decoration so as to get down to bare minima. Such an unconventional perspective on doing theatre led her to challenge established practices of acting, writing, directing, and teaching insofar as both women and men are concerned, since these practices rely almost exclusively on sexist conventions that literally and figuratively place women in corsets and predetermine the stories that can be told.

Pelletier's first experimental initiative was in 1975 when she organized a workshop at the TEM for research on the female character. She hoped participants in the workshop would create characters other than mothers, lovers, and servants. The workshop involved exercises to strip away inhibitions and false knowledge and to discover sources of the participants' own erotic energy. They worked to remove crippling emotions, such as fear and guilt, to set aside doubt when accused of being mad or ugly, to refuse taboos surrounding the female body, and to release the strength that had lain dormant in their suppressed capacity for physical aggression.

Next, Pelletier collaborated for several months with director and actor Luce Guilbeault and eleven other writers and actors in the creation of *La Nef des sorcières* (Le Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, March 1976). Pelletier played a lesbian character but found that the

role as written by Marie-Claire Blais gave her insufficient scope for theatrical experimentation and celebration of the *jouissance* she experienced when making love with a woman. She wrote a second monologue and played them both, wearing a wig in one and beginning the other by angrily ripping off the wig to reveal a defiantly shaved head. Pelletier has underlined the importance in her career of this, her first experience writing for and playing in women's theatre: "Mon premier vrai spectacle de femmes. Uniquement des femmes. Je dois beaucoup à Luce. Pour la première fois, j'ai écrit pour le théâtre, et c'était important, ça valait quelque chose, les femmes" (*Trac* 105).⁸ In 1979 Pelletier collaborated for a second time in a collective creation called *Célébrations* at the TNM. Pelletier performed an extract from Nicole Brossard's *Le sens apparent* and Jovette Marchessault's *Les Vaches de nuit* ["Night Cows"]. She is perhaps best known in the theatre world for her performance of *Les vaches de nuit*, a play in which, indeed, "a strong, tall, as-yet-unspoken feminine mythology" bursts onto the stage (see citation at the top of this article). The moment of recognition, through performance, of the extraordinary theatricality of Marchessault's text revealed to Pelletier the very basis of her feminist artistic practice and theoretical reflection (See *Joie* 36-7).

With the encouragement of TEM co-founder Jean-Pierre Ronfard, in September 1976 Pelletier, Guilbault, and two others created the first TEM *spectacle de femmes: Essai en trois mouvements pour trois voix de femmes*.⁹ A study without words of women's voices and bodies in motion, it experimented with voice, movement, props, and relations between actors and spectators. The following year they did *Finalement*, again a play without words that was the second in a triptych of experimental plays. In 1978 the women of the TEM collectively created *À ma mère, à ma mère, à ma mère, à ma voisine*. In this play, experimentation on characterization and words was added to ongoing play with voice and body movements. The violently angry desire to kill debilitating stereotypes of motherhood underlies the thematic structure of *À ma mère*. The three actors (Pelletier, Louise Laprade, and Nicole Lecavalier) and the stage manager (Dominique Gagnon) improvised and wrote parts of the text and staging instructions. As published with many personal notes and photos, *À ma mère* retains its qualities of collaboration, orality, improvisation, and theatricality. The publication in 1978 of *Trac Femmes. Cahier de théâtre expérimental*, a collection of short essays written by women who had participated with Pelletier at the TEM since 1975, shows a quite large community in search of new ways of doing theatre.

Their analyses are probing and passionate. In Pelletier's essay "Histoire d'une féministe" she situates herself as a strong feminist and explores what such a siting means for doing theatre, as well as what feminist theatre can do to combat sexist stereotypes prevailing in society and in women's own views of themselves and the world: "Il est grand temps qu'on fasse une analyse objective de ce métier, qu'on cesse de l'entourer de mille fadaïses romantiques. Que les comédiennes se rendent compte des images de femmes parfaitement rétrogrades et stupides qu'elles véhiculent pour la plupart" (97).¹⁰

The radical feminist positions affirmed in both *À ma mère* and *Trac* appear to have driven a wedge between Pelletier and most of those at the Théâtre Expérimental de Montréal, whose views on experimental theatre did not include any form of gender analysis and whose experimental practice, according to Pelletier in *Joie*, frequently included sexist stereotyping. A schism occurred, followed in February 1979 by the founding of the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes by Pelletier, Louise Laprade, and Nicole Lecavalier. The mission of the TEF was to offer the public a theatre where all roles and all positions were held by women. The TEF quickly became a centre and a symbol for the women's movement in Québec. As Noiseux has discussed, participation in the TEF required full commitment on the part of individuals, since it aimed at the total transformation of culture, knowledge, history, and human relations:

Les débuts du TEF n'engageaient pas que l'objet à créer, mais l'être tout entier: corps et esprit. Et si l'on proposait une autre définition de la cosmogonie, des mythes, de la marche de l'Histoire, du monde qui nous entoure, des relations entre les femmes et les hommes? [...] Il faut découvrir une autre manière de voir et de dire."¹¹

Working toward their mission involved Pelletier and other members of the company in the active training of women in all aspects of theatre, as well as workshops, festivals, lectures, conferences, and informal encounters. The years between 1979 and 1985 at the TEF were rich with a wide range of theatrical and paratheatrical events designed to construct a changed theatre community that allowed women to build on strengths, participate in fresh explorations, and give artistic form to new mythologies. At the same time, Pelletier continued to develop her theories on acting. "Jouer au féminin," which she wrote in 1982 and in which she mentions her admiration for Grotowski, is an important treatise

on acting. As Josette Féral has discussed, Pelletier's well-developed theories on acting (*le jeu*) are all the more impressive since there are few theoretical pieces by women of theatre anywhere on creating for theatre ("La place des femmes" 113-16).

The character in *Joie*, who evokes chronologically events at the TEM and the TEF between 1975-1985, takes readers and spectators into the experimental processes implemented by Pelletier and her colleagues to give theatrical form to at least some of the stories and mythologies that women have conceived upon finding the source of their psychic, physical, and spiritual harmony.

The Play's the Thing: *Joie*

In *Joie* Pelletier portrays herself exploring memories of her bold and uncompromising creative initiatives while doing experimental theatre *in the féminine* during the decade 1975-1985. The play is a sustained reflection on the theoretical and practical questions through which she was working at that time, as seen from the 1990s, when these questions seemed to have been forgotten. The play provides the distance Pelletier needed in order to ask what was achieved during those years of energy, optimism, and new community. *Joie* crosses generic boundaries in that it can be seen as both a play and a performance piece. Jeannie Forte describes the performance artist as not playing a role written for her by others, but rather performing autobiographically, speaking and writing for herself, affirming the reality of her material and corporeal presence, making her subversive, satirical points using non-canonical acting strategies, and undermining the symbolic structure of dominant representation systems, whose arbitrariness and contingency she is exposing and challenging (see particularly 252). *Joie* uses poetic devices to draw attention to theoretical concerns, and it mixes fact and fiction with dramatic abandon. The first word pronounced in the play echoes its title: "Joie" (9), which is further reinforced by the leitmotif: "LES FEMMES, L'ART ET LA JOIE!" (15).¹² However, the irony that must be seen to underlie the play's title and this leitmotif is highlighted throughout the play by its transformations, as joy is replaced by fear, problems, and culture: "Les femmes, l'art et la peur" (22); "Les femmes, l'art et les problèmes" (63); "Les femmes, l'art et la culture" (81).

The rich theme of women, art, and joy and the subject of memories of a decade of theatrical experimentation—along with the shrill barbs of irony that permeate this retrospective performance—receive sustained emphasis throughout the play with the interlocutor Pelletier created for her *persona*: "l'oiseau noir de la

mémoire.” This “black lark of her memory” (*Joy* 6) is the protagonist’s left hand wearing a black glove, which emerges from behind her back and intervenes to remind her of each successive incident as it reappears from the past. The “black lark of her memory” is thus an accomplice and an old friend, but also a disruptive trickster figure standing in the way of any complacent glossing over of painful memories.

Scenes in *Joye* cover the founding of the Théâtre Expérimental de Montréal and the beginning of work in collective creation with women. Pelletier was extremely active during this period of return to the simplicity of women’s uncostumed bodies in motion: she produced the extraordinary *À ma mère, à ma mère, à ma mère, à ma voisine*; she wrote and performed the lesbian Marcelle in *La Nef des sorcières*; she founded and operated the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes; she created Jovette Marchessault’s *Les Vaches de nuit* in *Célébrations* at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde; she collaborated with international theatre companies and travelled abroad; she wrote and created *La Lumière blanche* (a feminist tragedy and exorcism of debilitating fear); she staged Marchessault’s *La Terre est trop courte*, *Violette Leduc* and works by other radical playwrights, such as Lise Vaillancourt; and, finally, she resigned from the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes in 1985.

Pelletier’s quest throughout the decade was to work with other women seeking ways to inhabit their own bodies, hear their own voices, acknowledge their own feelings, explore their imaginations, find or invent stage means to show their experiences without the filter of patriarchal interpretive traditions, affirm the reality and legitimacy of women’s memory, and exercise material control of theatre space and technologies. *Joye* recalls a turbulent and exciting period in Quebec theatre and society; it revisits outrageous acts and painful disappointments, dreams and frustrations, successes, blocked paths and deep misunderstandings; it evokes memories of women coming together in theatre, sharing their passions and working there to bring new performative and interpretive communities into being.

There are also memories of these same communities bursting apart, as the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes ultimately did. The character in *Joye* representing Pelletier draws attention with sad irony to the distance between the shared lofty ideals at the TEF of changing society and the painful recognition that they could not even get along with each other: “On prétend changer le monde et on ne peut pas s’entendre à quatre personnes?” (75).¹³ *Joye* sustains a strand of lament from beginning to end for the loss of dreams,

passions, commitment, and shared vision. The play is an exploration and a search for the reasons why women's collective energy—which had been so powerful in the 1970s and 1980s as a means for affirming communities of women, with theatre companies doing collective creations, opening other performance spaces, meeting in bookstores and other public spaces, founding publishing houses, and collaborating in resistance to injustice—has dissipated. *Joie* does not offer facile explanations for why the social climate has changed. Instead, it explores factors: the absence of models for women coming together for creative and experimental artistic purposes; the equally serious absence of non-patriarchal performative and interpretive communities and spaces; the dominance and ubiquity of patriarchal cultural references and the roles for women that go with them; values placed by dominant socio-cultural practices on written texts; isolation of individuals; generalized fear; distrust of women who take on positions of power; and burn-out.

Toward the end of this richly layered, multivocal production, the protagonist of *Joie* talks to the black-gloved left hand of memory, reminding the bird of the radically new theatre aesthetic she forged in the 1970s based on the connections among women's voices and all parts of their bodies: powerful, mobile bodies taking up as much stage and theatre space as possible in defiance of all conventions of beauty and propriety:

Tu te souviens des années 70 où tu forgeais une esthétique complètement neuve: les femmes sur scène, bougeantes, impudiques, explosives, pas maquillées, pas coiffées, pas «costumées», on voyait leurs corps et leurs muscles et leur sueur, et leurs pieds, et ça se passait dans des espaces éclatés, des lieux inventés, avec le public tout mélangé là-dedans, assis de toutes sortes de façons bizarres, il ne savait plus si ce qu'il voyait était «beau» ou «laid», il n'avait plus de références, il était troublé. (93-4)¹⁴

The protagonist concludes her theoretical reflection at this moment with a simple but urgent question about beauty. If women step completely out of the beauty myth that has held them prisoner for so long, are there any aesthetic, epistemological, ontological, and ethical traditions that can endure unchanged?: “Qu'est-ce que la beauté?” (94). The suggestion is that beauty, like women's myths, has not yet been adequately told or represented in dominant cultures. Pelletier recalls in *Joie* the years when the play was the thing whereby she would catch the conscience of theatre and society.

Joie and Québec Theatre in the Feminine

I have noticed that when social or cultural practices are seen to be feminist, or even to belong primarily to areas of women's activities, they are excluded discursively from recognition as experimental practices. It is as though women's creativity and inventiveness are viewed as uncongenial or otherwise contradictory to that which is artistically or scientifically experimental. Of course, such an inability to see beyond the "feminism" word is alien to Pelletier's approach to theatre. She and her colleagues retained, after all, the appellation of an *experimental* theatre company after they separated from the Théâtre Expérimental de Montréal to form the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes. In fact, *Joie* offers a fine analysis of all the components of prevailing theatre practice that call out for experimentation; it provides theatrical demonstrations of the experiments that Pelletier, her colleagues, and members of her audiences carried out. In its refusal of productions based on the fetishisation of women's bodies, it illustrates well the integration of Brechtian theory into feminist theory through gestic feminist practice, as Elin Diamond has discussed: "[W]hat the spectator sees is not a mere miming of social relationship, but a *reading* of it, an interpretation by a historical subject who supplements (rather than disappears into) the production of meaning (90).

As described above, *Joie* can be read as a theoretical program on how she and her colleagues envisioned the renewal of theatre in ways that would make it a non-sexist cultural practice providing actors, members of the production community, writers, and the public opportunities to know the passion of "nous qui brûlons du feu" (35), of those 'who burn with fire', with a freed imagination, an expressive voice, and a body unconstrained by social conditioning. To demonstrate women's right to control their own bodies, memories, imagination, and desires, Pelletier cites the text by Nicole Brossard, "Le sens apparent," that she played in *Célébrations*: "nous appelons corps la forme que prennent nos corps une fois qu'ils se sont exercés à la mémoire, à l'imagination et à l'appétit" (35, 36)¹⁵ In Pelletier's work the actor's body has consistently been the site of struggle, enunciation, and myth-making.

Despite the positive connotations of titles such as *Joie* or *Célébrations*, it is important to note the emphasis placed throughout the play, and indeed throughout Pelletier's theatre career, on the theme of fear—fear that is so deeply rooted in women's bodies that it is rarely acknowledged, despite its debilitating impact. Pelletier's practice for uprooting fear necessitated recognition of the violence to self and to others that is needed for such uprooting.

“Niceness” will not do it. Women must learn assertiveness, even violence to themselves and in their relations with other women, if they are to go beyond the boundaries dictated by fear:

ON A PEUR.

ON A PEUR. [...]

On a peur de s’engager dans le pacte, la fidélité, la responsabilité ... de l’amour!

On a peur de s’engager dans la violence! Oh non, même pas la violence physique. La violence de ce que nous ressentons, car ce que nous ressentons *est* violent. Et nous avons peur d’identifier précisément ce que nous ressentons si violemment.

Qu’est-ce qui se passe ENTRE nous?

Qu’est-ce qu’on laisse dans l’ombre?

Qu’est-ce que cette femme catalyse d’insupportable, et d’indicible, et de trop douloureux en chacune de nous? (emphasis in original, 73-74)¹⁶

Joie begins with awareness of injustices and the denunciation of stereotypes, exclusions, and demonstrations of ideologies at play in the constitution of existing performative and interpretive communities. As Pelletier took careful stock of representational practices in dominant culture, as well as the opportunities available to her as a member of the theatre community, she found—even of the boldest of experimental theatre companies—no room for women as agents and players in their own spectacles. From the start *Joie* expresses the anger she felt in the face of such exclusion: “Le langage primitif des débuts était lié à une révolte extrême, un rejet radical de la société et de toutes ses manifestations culturelles” (80).¹⁷ It also expresses the urgent need to refuse to play any longer the subservient roles that serve the *status quo*. The play is a blueprint for action, beginning with aggressive demonstrations of physical power and control.

It was creating Jovette Marchessault’s *Les Vaches de nuit*, as well as *Célébrations*, that revealed directly to Pelletier the psychic and physical states where the inner dimensions of acting become evident. This revelation confirmed the path she was already taking in theatre; it became the basis of her theatrical research: “Ce jour-là je suis tombée dans ce que j’ai appelé par la suite le véritable «état de jeu»: un état physique et psychique très particulier qui est devenu la base de mes recherches” (*Joie* 37).¹⁸ To reach this true *state of acting* it was necessary to get dominant cultural practices and words out of the heads and bodies of actors, directors, and spectators.

Pelletier explores at some length in *Joie* the reasons why the

approaches of collective creation, very popular among Quebec theatre companies in the 1970s and 1980s, seemed to lend themselves particularly well to feminist experimental theatre having the objectives just mentioned. In fact, the play develops an implicit equation between experimental theatre and collective creation:

C'est par l'oralité que les créations collectives de femmes ont vu le jour.
Par le langage.
En se racontant nos histoires de femmes, car cette matière n'existait pas encore dans les livres, ou si peu. Aussi, en inventant, dans la vie de tous les jours, des nouveaux gestes, des nouveaux comportements, des nouveaux langages. [...]
Les créations collectives étaient aussi étonnantes parce qu'elles étaient le reflet des innovations que nous amenions dans nos vies. [...]
La création collective, au point de départ comme au point d'arrivée, ce n'est pas un texte, c'est des corps qui bougent et qui font des sons. [...] (47-48)¹⁹

Joie, as portrait of the experimental artist as militant feminist and radical woman of theatre, takes readers and audiences through the experience of working individually and collectively in corporeal, concrete, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. It is a thoroughly ambitious project. Pelletier's protagonist recognises, however, that it has had mitigated impact.²⁰ She indicates her extreme discouragement in not finding Quebec theatre transformed, not even finding many women in theatre working together to achieve such transformation, despite the fact that there is now a significant number of women in senior artistic and administrative positions. Even the memory of the struggle seems to have been lost in such a short time: "Comment ça se fait que l'histoire que je vous raconte est tombée dans l'oubli? Comment ça se fait que c'est moi qui doit raconter cette histoire? Comment ça se fait que les femmes qui m'ont suivie et qui ont bâti leur travail sur le mien font comme si ce travail n'avait jamais existé?" (90).²¹

In response to this question regarding the absence of strong feminist awareness in today's theatre and society, Pelletier's character offers the surprising hypothesis that women's demands and experimental creative power were so compelling and relevant that they awakened endemic, paralysing fear and thereby frightened even those who were making them, causing women and girls to feel guilty about being seen to be making so much noise and causing upset:

Tu sais ce que je pense? Je pense que nous, les femmes nous nous sentons collectivement COUPABLES d'avoir crié haut et fort dans les années 70, même les jeunes femmes qui n'étaient pas là, et qui s'imaginent que tout est réglé, elles aussi sont coupables, la culpabilité est partout, dans l'air, dans nos os. Je pense que nous nous sommes fait très peur et que nous n'osons plus rien dire. [...] Je pense que le mouvement des femmes a posé des questions fondamentales qui nous ont tous et toutes secoué-e-s jusque dans nos racines, où nous avons touché et l'HORREUR, et le RÊVE. (90-91).²²

Despite the apparent absence at the present time of success in Pelletier's bold experimental endeavor over more than a decade to change theatre and society, the conclusion of *Joie* affirms the character's commitment to the continuing struggle—to keep the flame burning—and to the belief that it is possible to get rid of the stifling dead wood inside each individual and society collectively:

J'ai brûlé et j'ai crié. Plusieurs fois.
Pour allumer le feu sur la place publique, il faut commencer par prendre tout le bois mort qui est à l'intérieur et le jeter dans la flamme. Tous les jours, j'en brûle encore un petit bout. [...] L'espoir est une poire dans une foire ... (98-99)²³

In *Joie* Pelletier has given a complex and composite portrait of herself and other women as creative, self-reflexive writers and theatre artists. While it is a one-woman show, it weaves a fabric of multiple sounds, voices and images. Using first- and second-person pronouns—for example in the dialogue between herself and “the black lark of memory”—she projects herself into the stage *personae* of this autobiographical performance piece as warrior, player, writer, director, and artistic director. She recounts and re-plays old roles, but always with a difference and in a fresh tapestry. There is new textual material and old. Around the new textual material, Pelletier has woven the voices of other of her own published or performed texts, or collective creations in which she participated. The narrative contains additional quotations written by other writers from plays she produced or played in.

Joie is a celebration of an exhilarating decade in women's theatre in Quebec. It is also a celebration of women's memory, creativity, physical presence, and spirit. It is an important treatise on the art of acting and the profession of theatre. The characters in the story it tells did not achieve all their objectives. Indeed, in many ways, the story shows the power of fear and dominant cultural practices to crush women's vision, creativity, and erotic energy.

Much remains to be done before women and men can take their place and exercise their full power on public stages. This play, including Pelletier's many performances of it in Quebec, in France, and elsewhere, is a significant step in affirming the power of experimental theatre by women. ❁

NOTES

- 1 "I've been dreaming for ten years of seeing female characters who are 'other', the bursting onto a stage of a strong, tall, as-yet-unspoken feminine mythology." (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.)
- 2 "CHANGE THE WORLD. Yes, that's what I'm daring to try."
- 3 "[I]n writing this show, I wanted to respond to basic questions about my profession." ("Réflexions autour de «Joie»" 30).
- 4 Pelletier is not alone in adapting autobiography to suit her creative and theoretical purposes. New forms of autobiography have been developed and used extensively in Quebec and elsewhere by contemporary women writers, including playwrights. These writers have found that autobiography opens avenues for innovation to tell stories and make experiences visible that established cultural institutions have so far failed to include in their works.
- 5 Josette Féral's interview with Pelletier in 1992 provides interesting detail on Pelletier's theoretical position on acting. As the title of the interview indicates, it is a matter of freeing the actor from narrow mental notions that inhibit the body and block the connections between it and inner spaces.
- 6 Following is the chronology of the creation of successive versions in Montreal by Pelletier of the three plays in *La Trilogie des histoires*:

<i>Joie</i> (1st version)	1990	co-production of the Dare-Dare gallery and the Maison de la culture Côte-des-Neiges
<i>Joie</i> (2nd version)	1992	Le Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui
<i>Joie</i> (3rd version)	1993	Le Festival de théâtre des Amériques in Montréal
<i>Joie</i> (4th version)	1993	La Compagnie Pol Pelletier
<i>Océan</i> (1st version)	1995	La Compagnie Pol Pelletier
<i>Océan</i> (2nd version)	1996	La Compagnie Pol Pelletier
<i>Joie</i> & <i>Océan</i>	1997	L'Académie québécoise du théâtre awards her Masque de l'Interprétation Féminine
<i>Or</i>	1997	Le Festival de théâtre des Amériques in Montréal
<i>Or</i>	2000	Benefit for the Marche Internationale des Femmes against world hunger

Joie was invited to the Festival International des Francophonies en Limousin in September 1993, to the Journées Théâtrales de Carthage, Tunisia in October 1993, and by Ariane Mnouchkine to the Théâtre du Soleil December 1993. *Joy* was premiered in English by Pelletier in 1995 with Theatre Passe-Muraille in Toronto.

- 7 “The voice that’s connected to my tailbone that’s connected to my feet, that are connected to my head. JUMP! JUMP! Displace the air, trample the ground, feel bones and muscles and almost die with delight.” For a detailed and early discussion by Pelletier of her theoretical position regarding acting and the actress’s profession, see “Histoire d’une féministe” and “Jouer au féminin.”
- 8 “My first real women’s show. Only women. I owe a good deal to Luce. For the first time, I wrote for the theatre, and women were important, it was worth something.”
- 9 For a description of *Essai en trois mouvements*, along with a discussion of experimental objectives, staging methods, and theoretical reflections, see *Trac* 6-12; for *Finalemment*, see *Trac* 13-23; for *À ma mère*, see *Trac* 24-39. An overview of the three shows, “Réflexions sur les trois spectacles” (37-8) provides further insight into these experimental productions and also shows that they did not turn out to be the triptych originally intended, which is precisely what happens in experimental theatre.
- 10 “It is high time that an objective analysis of this profession be made, that it cease to be surrounded by a thousand insipid romantic notions. That actresses take stock of the perfectly stupid and retrograde images of women that they are responsible for perpetuating for the most part.”
- 11 “The beginnings of the TEF did not engage only the object to be created, but the entire being: body and spirit. What if we proposed other definitions of the cosmogony, of myths, of the march of History, of the world that surrounds us, of the relations between women and men? [...] It is necessary to discover another manner of seeing and of saying.” For some idea of the critical attention the TEF and women’s theatre received in the early 1980s, see Works Cited.
- 12 “WOMEN, ART AND JOY.”
- 13 “We claim we’re going to change the world and we can’t get along among the four of us?”
- 14 “Do you remember the seventies when you were forging a completely new esthetic—women on stage, physical, immodest, explosive, no make-up, no wigs, no fancy costumes, we could see their bodies and their muscles and their sweat and their feet, and it all took place in non-traditional spaces with the audience seated in all sorts of strange arrangements, and they could no longer tell whether what they were seeing was ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly,’ there were no more points of reference, they were deeply disturbed.”
- 15 “[W]e define the body as the form adopted by our bodies once they have practiced memory, imagination and appetite.”
- 16 WE ARE AFRAID.

WE ARE AFRAID. [...]

We are afraid of committing to the bond, to the fidelity and the responsibility of ... love! We are afraid of committing to the violence! Oh, no, not even physical violence. The violence of what we feel, because what we feel *is* violent. And we are afraid to identify exactly what it is we feel so violently.

What is going on BETWEEN us?

What are we keeping in the dark?

What is this woman catalysing that is so unbearable, so unspeakable and so, so painful in each one of us? (*Joy* 41)

- 17 “The primitive language of the early shows reflected a radical rejection of society and all its cultural manifestations” (*Joy* 44).

- 18 “That day I fell into what I now call the true ‘state of acting.’ A very special physical and psychic state that has become the basis of my research” (*Joy* 20).

- 19 “It was through oral transmission that women’s collective creations were born. Through talk. Girl talk.

By telling each other about our experiences as women, since this material was not yet, or at least rarely, available in books. Also by reinventing, in every day life, new gestures, new behaviour, new languages. [...] Collective creations were astounding because they reflected the innovations we were bringing to our lives. [...]

Collective creation, at the starting point and at the point of arrival, is not a text, it’s bodies in movement, bodies making sounds. [...] (*Joy* 27-28)

- 20 In “Le Théâtre expérimental des femmes: essai en trois mouvements” three women of theatre closely associated with the TEF and its audiences took stock in 1985 of its successes and disappointments.

- 21 “Why is it that the story I am telling you has fallen into oblivion? Why do I have to be the one to tell this story? Why is it that the women who came after me and who built their work on mine act as if that work had never existed?” (*Joy* 50).

- 22 “Do you know what I think? I think that we women feel collectively GUILTY, guilty of having shouted so loud and so long in the seventies, even the young women who weren’t there, and who imagine that all the problems have been solved, they also feel guilty, guilt is everywhere, in the air, in our bones. I think we really frightened ourselves and we don’t dare say anything anymore. [...] I think the women’s movement asked fundamental questions that shook all of us, men and women, right down to our very roots, where we struck both the HORROR and the DREAM” (*Joy* 50).

- 23 “I burned and I screamed. Several times.

In order to light the fire in the public square, you must begin by taking all the dead wood that is inside and throwing it into the flames, Every day, I burn a little more. [...] Hope is a lark in the park ...”

WORKS CITED

- Brossard, Nicole. "Le Sens apparent." *Célébrations. La Nouvelle Barre du jour* 75 (1979): 11-23.
- Diamond, Elin. "Brechtian Theory/ Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism." *The Drama Review* 32.1 (Spring 1988): 82-94.
- Féral, Josette. "Écriture et déplacement: la femme au théâtre." *The French Review* 56.2 (Dec. 1982): 281-292.
- . "Arrêter le mental. Entretien avec Pol Pelletier." *Cahiers de théâtre. Jeu* 65 (1992): 35-45.
- . "La place des femmes dans les théories actuelles du jeu théâtral: l'exemple de Pol Pelletier." *Nouveaux Regards sur le théâtre québécois*. Dirs. Betty Bednarski & Irène Oore. Montreal & Halifax: XYZ Éditeur & Dalhousie French Studies, 1997. 105-116.
- . "Pol Pelletier: le théâtre est le lieu de rencontre du visible et de l'invisible." *Mise en scène et jeu de l'acteur. Entretiens. Tome 2: Le corps en scène*. Montréal/ Carnières: Éditions Jeu/ Éditions Lansman, 1998. 229-252.
- Forste, Jeannie. "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Post-Modernism." *Performing Feminisms*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990. 251-269.
- Gagnon, Dominique, Louise Laprade, Nicole Lecavalier and Pol Pelletier. *À ma mère, à ma mère, à ma mère, à ma voisine*. Montreal: Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 1979.
- Godard, Barbara. "Between Repetition and Rehearsal: Conditions of (Women's) Theatre in Canada in a Space of Reproduction." *Theatre Research in Canada/ Recherches théâtrales au Canada* 13.1-2 (1992): 18-33.
- Guilbeault, Luce, Marthe Blackburn, France Théoret, Odette Gagnon, Marie-Claire Blais, Pol Pelletier and Nicole Brossard. *La Nef des sorcières*. Montreal: Quinze, 1976. Tr. Linda Gaboriau. *A Clash of Symbols*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979.
- Marchessault, Jovette. *La Terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc*. Montreal: Éditions de la Pleine Lune, 1982. Tr. Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood. *The Edge of Earth Is Too Near, Violette Leduc*. 1985 (from Le Centre des Auteurs Dramatiques in Montreal [CEAD]).
- . "Les Vaches de nuit." *Tryptique lesbien*. Montréal: Éditions de la Pleine Lune, 1980. 79-94. Tr. Yvonne M. Klein. *Night-Cows*. 1978 (available from CEAD). The original version of "Les Vaches de nuit" was published in *Célébrations. La Nouvelle Barre du Jour* 75 (février 1979): 83-92.
- Noiseux, Ginette. "Du Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes à l'Espace GO: une autre manière de dire." *Théâtre. Les Cahiers de la Maîtrise* 7 (2002): 44-55.

- Pelletier, Pol. "Histoire d'une féministe." *Trac Femmes. Cahier de théâtre expérimental*. Montréal: Les Publications Trac, enr. 1978: 92-97.
- . "Petite Histoire" *Possibles* 4.1 (automne 1979): 175-187.
- . "Jouer au féminin." *Pratiques Théâtrales* 16 (1982): 11-21.
- . "Myth and Women's Theatre." *In the Feminine. Women and Words / Les Femmes et les mots*. Eds. Ann Dybikowski, Victoria Freeman, Daphne Marlatt, Barbara Pulling, Betsy Warland. Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1985: 110-113.
- . *La Lumière blanche*. Montréal: Les Herbes Rouges, 1989. Tr. Yvonne M. Klein. *The White Light*. 1987 (available from CEAD).
- . "Réflexions autour de «Joie»." *Cahiers de théâtre. Jeu* 65 (décembre 1992): 30-34.
- . *Joie*. Montréal: Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 1995.